

LABOR AGE

THE VOICE OF PROGRESSIVE LABOR

Do We Need A
NEW PARTY?

C.P.L.A. Statement for Discussion

Paterson Silk Strike

The Belleville Convention

Liberalism in the Socialist Party

AUGUST, 1931

25 CENTS

Paterson Silk Workers Strike!

ON Tuesday, July 28th at 10 o'clock in the morning, Paterson silk workers were called out on a mass strike by the Joint Action Committee composed of representatives of the United Textile Workers' Locals in Paterson, Associated Silk Workers and the C. P. L. A. The strike call represented the culmination of months of effort in which C. P. L. A. took an active part, and about which our members and other readers of Labor Age ought to have the correct conception.

For years the union situation in the Paterson silk industry has been in confusion and efforts at organization have been ineffective because there have been a number of competing unions in the field. The honest workers didn't know whom to follow; and the indifferent and dishonest had a good excuse for not joining anyone. The chief organizations were several locals of the United Textile Workers, largely confined to the more skilled crafts, such as, loom-fixers, twistors, and warpers, and an independent union called the Associated Silk Workers which claimed jurisdiction over the entire silk industry, but actually figured among the ribbon and hat band workers and the broad silk weavers.

Back in 1928, left-wingers in Paterson, then operating under the slogan of the United Front, enlisted the cooperation of Chairman A. J. Muste in an effort to bring together these various organizations. Chairman Muste was invited to become "impartial chairman" of conferences between representatives of the two groups, which proved successful. A plan for amalgamation under the U. T. W. was adopted. At the last minute, however, the left-wing elements in Paterson who had initiated this movement, decided to break it up; the Communist Party had abandoned the United Front policy and adopted in its stead the policy of building its own Communist unions!

Some months ago, representatives of the Paterson movement again came to Chairman Muste and Brother Budenz, described the wretched conditions existing among the silk workers—wages had been cut no less than 40 per cent in the last three or four years, and the eight hour day had been completely lost in the broad silk shops which operate anywhere from 48 to

60 hours per week when there is work—and asked the C. P. L. A. to interest itself in an organization campaign for these workers. Such a call could not be lightly turned down.

The C. P. L. A. laid down certain conditions, however, for effective action in the Paterson situation.

Conditions for Effective Action

1. The existing U. T. W. locals and the Associated Silk Workers must be amalgamated. Such a demonstration of unity would encourage the workers tremendously.
2. For the sake of achieving as broad a unity as possible, the amalgamated organization must be in the U. T. W. and thus connected with the American labor movement, but in order that national trade union officials should not be in a position to cripple militant organization activity or to make questionable strike settlements for Paterson silk workers, we stipulated that the U. T. W. must definitely allow the Paterson silk workers together with those in Allentown and elsewhere to establish an autonomous federation of silk workers within the U. T. W. similar to the Full Fashioned Hosiery Workers' Federation.
3. Accompanying and following the movement to amalgamate existing unions, there must be a vigorous campaign of organization and education among the workers, leading up to a general strike.
4. Close connections must be established between the Paterson workers and the Allentown strikers, and the two situations regarded as essentially one.

The C. P. L. A. had in mind also making contacts among rank and file silk workers in Paterson and so building up a rank and file group of C. P. L. A.'ers which would put vigor into the old organizations, get rid of such officials as prove themselves unworthy or no longer capable of handling the situation, develop educational activities, etc.

The numerous activities into which the C. P. L. A. has been called in

recent months, together with our small staff and restricted finances, caused some delay from our side in tackling the Paterson situation. However, presently conferences were held in the C. P. L. A. office in which members of the U. T. W. and the Associated Silk Workers participated. Eli Keller who had been at one time national secretary of the National Textile Workers Union, but had been expelled from that union, and who is now a silk worker in Paterson, and Ben Gitlow, a member of the organization committee of the American Fund for Public Service, were also present. An appeal of the various groups to the American Fund for Public Service for an appropriation of \$3,000 for organization work in Paterson was successful. A sub-committee of the Fund was authorized to release the money as soon as the amalgamation movement got under way and organization activities were launched.

About two months ago, conferences toward bringing about amalgamation actually began in Paterson. The Paterson unionists asked A. J. Muste to serve as chairman of the conferences, and Louis F. Budenz as secretary. In the absence of Chairman Muste in the Middle West, Brother Budenz acted as chairman of the joint conferences. A plan for amalgamating the Paterson unions was drawn up and the official sanction of the U. T. W. for the establishment of an autonomous silk workers federation obtained. The amalgamation movement culminated on Friday evening, July 17, when the Associated Silk Workers voted to adopt the plan to affiliate with the U. T. W.

In the meantime, the committee handling the amalgamation plan gradually also became a Joint Action Committee for carrying on organization work and preparing for a general strike. In all this, there were irritating delays for which U. T. W. and A. S. W. representatives seemed about equally to blame, and which were all the more unfortunate because the Allentown strike was being drawn out and so more and more in need of support from an organization and strike movement in Paterson.

Communists Rush In

Just as the amalgamation negotiations were drawing to a successful

close, the Communists suddenly became very active in the silk situation. First they concentrated on Allentown and owing to the slackness of U. T. W. officials, captured two Allentown strike meetings. They got the Allentown strikers to vote for "a united front rank and file movement" with Paterson. They then took 100 or more Allentown strikers to Paterson over the week-end and sought by a whirlwind campaign to take charge of the Paterson situation and precipitate a National Textile Workers' strike there, although they had practically no roots among the Paterson workers. For these tactics of splitting and capturing in Allentown, there is no excuse whatever. The slow progress of the amalgamation negotiations and organization activities in Paterson, did give some excuse to the N. T. W. for injecting itself into that situation.

While maintaining that the workers in Paterson had nothing substantial to hope for from the leadership of the N. T. W. which had similarly injected itself into an Associated Silk Workers' strike in 1928 and pretty well discredited itself among Paterson workers, the C. P. L. A. representatives on the Joint Action Committee insisted that both the situation in Paterson and the need of the Allentown strikers for support, required swift action on the part of the Joint Action Committee, so that the Paterson silk workers might be united and might have definite proof of vigorous leadership in which they could trust. Under pressure from our representatives, the Joint Action Committee on Monday, July 20, voted to call a general strike for August 3. The National Textile Workers, seeking to force the situation, independently called a strike for Wednesday, July 22.

At the Joint Action Committee meeting on July 21, the C.P.L.A. representatives insisted that we must not be a party to creating confusion among the workers in Paterson, that it would lead to bitterness and despair if some workers were on strike and others were told to keep in, virtually scabbing on them, and that therefore our strike date should be advanced. The U.T.W. representatives in particular objected that they had not yet obtained authority from their locals for such precipitate action. The C.P.L.A. representatives pointed out that we were confronted with a grave emergency and that under the circumstances, courageous emergency action ought to be taken. However, the Joint Action Committee that evening found itself unable to agree on advancing the date

of the strike. Thereupon, the C.P.L.A. representatives announced that they would be compelled to withdraw temporarily from official connection with the Joint Action Committee. They agreed, however, that in view of the delicacy of the situation, they would make no public statement that day, but would attend the meeting of the committee the next evening and be guided in their future course by the decisions arrived at at this meeting.

The following day, the N.T.W. strike call went into effect. Very few workers responded to the call. It was clear that the N.T.W. did not have a real hold on the Paterson workers and that these workers were looking to the amalgamated movement led by the Joint Action Committee for leadership.

That night, a new spirit was shown in the Joint Action Committee. The U.T.W. representatives agreed immediately to call meetings of their locals and to ask that they be clothed with full power including authority to advance the strike date if necessary. Arrangements were made for immediate distribution of leaflets among the workers, outdoor meetings, etc. A meeting was also called for Monday, July 27, of all organized workers to make detailed plans for the conduct of an effective strike. It was agreed furthermore, that members of the Joint Action Committee would do nothing to induce workers to remain at work while others were on strike.

During the next couple of days, several more shops came out on strike, some of them in sympathy with the N.T.W., others in sympathy with the other group.

On Saturday afternoon, July 25, the Joint Action Committee met in an emergency session. All the locals reported that their representatives had been given full emergency power. Thereupon, the general strike date was advanced to 10 o'clock on Tuesday morning, July 28, and hours were spent in arranging for presentation of demands, distribution of leaflets, arrangement of mass meetings, and other strike activities.

Principal Strike Demands

The principal demands in the strike are the restoration of the eight hour day, abolition of overtime, not less than 35 per cent increase in piece-rates for broad silk weavers, proportionate increases for auxiliary help, a minimum of \$24 per week for dyers' help-

ers, the union scale for all loom-fixers, etc., and recognition of the union.

Militants and progressives should rally to the support of the Paterson strike movement. The conditions among the silk workers are such that it is utterly impossible for them to survive without an effort to better these conditions and to consolidate their ranks.

The fundamentals of correct policy in this situation must be carefully kept in mind. They are as follows:

1. The details of the amalgamation of the U.T.W. locals and the A.S.W. must be worked out as rapidly as possible in order that after the strike, there may be a single organization to represent the workers in the shops.
2. The strike must be carried on in a vigorous and militant fashion leading up to honestly made settlements. Insofar as complete victory may not be possible, there must be a frank admission that economic conditions have in part defeated the workers and that they must rally their forces for future struggles.
3. Close and effective contact must be maintained with the Allentown situation.
4. Steps for the actual establishment of the autonomous national federation of silk workers must be taken at the earliest possible moment. If necessary, conferences to this end must be held even during the strike.
5. Vigorous and militant rank and file elements must be drawn into C.P.L.A. groups, must be trained in union activity and inspired to work constantly for the development among the silk workers of an all-around progressive labor movement.

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